



MINISTRY OF
HOUSING AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Report of the Inquiry into
**The Draft of the
Skelmersdale New Town
(Designation) Order, 1961**

LONDON
HER MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE
1961

PRICE 1s. 3d. NET

CONTENTS

	<i>page</i>
Introduction	3
The Proposal and Background	4
Supporting Statements	6
Objections	8
Discussion	12
Conclusions and Recommendations	15

Report of a Public Local Inquiry by Sir Richard Manktelow, K.B.E., C.B. into objections and representations made to the Draft of the Skelmersdale New Town (Designation) Order, 1961.

3, Craigweil Manor,
Aldwick,
Sussex.

24th July, 1961.

TO THE RT. HON. HENRY BROOKE, M.P.,
Minister of Housing and Local Government, and
Minister for Welsh Affairs.

SIR,

I. Introduction

1. I have the honour to report on the Public Local Inquiry respecting objections to the proposal to designate an area of some 4,000 acres as the site of a new town at Skelmersdale in south Lancashire. The Inquiry was held in the Skelmersdale Town Hall on 31st May, 1st and 2nd June; and on 6th and 7th June, in company with some of the interested parties, I visited various parts of the site, including a number of farms, and some of the surrounding areas.

2. Appended is a list of the appearances at the Inquiry, together with a list of those who put in written objections and representations but did not pursue them orally:

LIST OF APPEARANCES

To make statements:

Ministry of Housing and Local Government—

Mr. T. D. Wickenden, C.I.E., Assistant Secretary

Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food—

Mr. A. G. Conner, B.Sc., Senior Assistant Land Commissioner

Lancashire County Council—

Mr. B. Hill, Assistant Solicitor

Mr. U. Aylmer Coates, B.Arch., P.P.T.P.I., F.R.I.B.A., County Planning Officer

Skelmersdale Urban District Council—

Mr. P. A. Verdin, Solicitor

Council for the Preservation of Rural England, Lancashire Branch—

Mr. Philip Barnes, M.B.E., Branch Secretary

Town and Country Planning Association—

Mr. Lewis B. Keeble, M.C., B.Sc., M.A., F.R.I.C.S., M.T.P.I.

To advance objections:

National Farmers' Union, Lancashire County Branch—

Counsel—Mr. T. H. Pigot

Witnesses—Mr. F. Wearing, A.R.I.C.S., Chartered Surveyor

Mr. R. Winstanley, Agricultural Valuer and Land Agent

Wigan Rural District Council and Dalton Parish Council—

Counsel—Mr. A. M. Knight

Witnesses—Mr. R. Poole, Chartered Surveyor and Member of the Town Planning Institute

Mr. W. F. Martlow, Chairman Dalton Parish Council

Mr. C. J. Ainscough, Wigan Rural District Councillor

Mr. D. Chisholm, Clerk, Standish with Langtree Urban District Council

Mr. Wm. Forrest, Chorley Rural District Councillor

Wigan County Borough Council—

Mr. J. H. Craik, LL.M., Deputy Town Clerk

Witness—Mr. G. Keighley, B.Sc., A.M.I.C.E., A.M.I.Mech.E.,
M.I.Mun.E., A.M.T.P.I., Borough Engineer

Country Landowners' Association, Lancashire Branch—

Mr. M. A. Gregory, Solicitor

Witness—Mr. J. Thompson, Regional Secretary

Lancashire River Board—

Mr. Cox, Chief Clerk

Mrs. M. Green

Mr. Roy Lyon.

Written objections

3. The following had put forward written objections and representations but did not pursue them at the Inquiry—

Kirkby Urban District Council

Mr. G. Phythian, farmer: was content with case made on behalf of Lancashire Branch N.F.U.

Mr. O. C. Lace, Parbold

Mr. H. Holt, on behalf of 49 householders in West Ward of Up Holland: content with case made on behalf of Wigan Rural District Council.

Wigan District Brewers' Association

Mr. J. T. Price, M.P.

Mr. C. H. A. Appleton, Newburgh

Brocks Fireworks Ltd.

II. The Proposal and Background

4. The proposal stems from the need to house overspill from the congested areas of north Merseyside, particularly Liverpool. This city is said to contain more than 80,000 slum or near-slum houses. The problem is made all the more pressing because the population and the number of households are growing at a rate well above the national average. At the same time there remains very little undeveloped land suitable for housing and this means that the bulk of the urgent need must be met outside the city. Moreover it has been found necessary to place a strict limit on peripheral development, so that land for overspill housing must be sought beyond the green belt.

5. The proposal to develop Skelmersdale to meet part of the need is by no means new. The county council's development plan submitted some ten years ago included provision for a new town under the New Towns Act, 1946, but this was deleted from the approved plan. Instead the possibility was explored of schemes on the basis of the Town Development Act, 1952, which provides for

the reception of overspill under schemes arranged and managed by the local authorities themselves. Agreement was eventually reached on a scheme for some 48,000 of Liverpool's overspill to be housed at Skelmersdale. It was then felt, however, that to rely entirely on action under the Town Development Act, 1952, would place a great strain on local government with no certainty that the results would be commensurate with the scale and urgency of the problem. In addition there would be the complication at Skelmersdale of an area running into several local government districts. Hence the idea of a government new town at Skelmersdale was revived.

6. The proposal is that the new town should be entirely self-contained, with its own industry as well as shopping, educational and recreational facilities. The development corporation would build for some 50,000 people and thereafter the town would complete its growth in the normal way up to a final total of the order of 80,000.

7. The suggested site covers some 4,029 acres. It includes nearly the whole of Skelmersdale Urban District and parts of Up Holland Urban District, Ormskirk Urban District (part of Lathom parish) and Wigan Rural District (part of Dalton parish). The present population is said to be about 8,500, most of whom live in the existing town of Skelmersdale. The site lies between Ormskirk and Wigan and some 13 miles north east of central Liverpool. It is roughly bisected by the River Tawd, a tributary of the Douglas. For the most part the area is gently undulating at levels between 100 and 250 feet, but a mile east of the Tawd the land rises more steeply to 550 feet on the ridge—just under Ashurst's Beacon—forming the north-eastern boundary of the designated area.

8. Rail communication is provided on the southern boundary by the line from Liverpool through Wigan to Manchester, and on the west by a subsidiary line from St. Helens to Ormskirk which at present is not used for passenger traffic but could presumably be brought back into such use if the demand justified it. The Ormskirk-Wigan road (A. 577) crosses the site from west to east but through traffic will eventually use a new by-pass to be made south of the existing road. To the east, between Wigan and Skelmersdale, is the line of the Birmingham-Preston motorway and work on this section has already started.

9. The matters of water, gas and electricity supplies have been considered and are said to present no problems. Surface drainage, sewerage and sewage disposal works would need to be extended but this should raise no serious difficulty.

AGRICULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

10. 82 per cent. of the designated area is in agricultural use and 59 holdings are affected, 35 wholly and 24 partly. Something like four-fifths of the holdings are farmed by owner-occupiers, and 12 farms have qualified for grants under the Farm Improvement Scheme. The standard of farming is generally good.

11. To the west of the Tawd the land is of first class quality, very suitable for arable cultivation because it can be worked in most weather conditions. Farther west, beyond the proposed boundary, conditions are favourable for intensive cultivation and the area is extremely important agriculturally.

12. To the east of the Tawd the land deteriorates somewhat as it rises to the Ashurst's Ridge and beyond. It is suitable for grassland but the possibilities of arable cultivation are restricted. Towards and beyond the southern boundary the soils are similar to those on the west and the land is correspondingly important agriculturally.

III. Supporting Statements

LANCASHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

13. The county council said they have always felt that an essential part of the solution of Liverpool's housing problem should be large scale development at Skelmersdale. The present proposal was bigger than that put forward by the council at an earlier stage, but they fully endorsed the latest official view of the scope of the problem and the scale of development required to meet it. They also felt that the suggested new town would ease the pressure on the green belt which they were most anxious to establish around the Merseyside area. Once an adequate separation from the existing conurbation was assured there were positive advantages in not moving people far away and the council thought the relative nearness of Skelmersdale would be a real attraction to people and to industry from north Merseyside.

14. The council did not wish to suggest any alteration of the boundaries of the designated area. They thought the interests of agriculture had been met as far as possible, that is to say, up to the point where the needs of the new town were of overriding importance. As to the gap between the new town and Wigan, their own boundary for a smaller town had been farther west but they thought that with the line now proposed any tendency towards coalescence would be prevented by the north-south motorway and strict control of building so as to allow only in-filling in the area between the two towns.

15. The council were certainly anxious that the amenities of Ashurst's Ridge and Beacon should be safeguarded. In the earlier town development scheme this area had been excluded in view of strong local opposition and the need to reach agreement. They would not object to its omission from the new town area but they did not suggest this as they felt confident that the interests of amenity would be protected by those who would be responsible for drawing up the development plan.

16. The overspill needs of Liverpool and the rest of north Merseyside were enough to justify not just one new town but three or four. Admittedly there would not be room for these in south Lancashire, but that was no argument against proceeding with the one for which room could be found.

SKELMERSDALE URBAN DISTRICT COUNCIL

17. The urban district council had already accepted proposals for the reception of overspill from the Liverpool area and in view of the size and urgency of the problem they now fully supported the idea of a government new town. This was on the understanding that all essential services would be provided in good time and on adequate scale, that there would be sufficient industry of suitable kinds to meet the needs of a balanced community, and that in the intervening period any proposals for good quality private housing should be sympathetically considered if they were not likely to cut across the ultimate town plan. The council were satisfied with the suggested boundaries and thought they should be varied only if there were general agreement on the need for some change. They promised full co-operation if the scheme were to go ahead.

LANCASHIRE BRANCH

18. The branch remarked that as a body whose prime duty was to defend the Lancashire countryside, it would be easy for them to oppose almost every proposal for overspill reception in the county. But they had no wish to appear negative or obstructive and they did not allow themselves to be guided only by the local reaction which was usually opposed to important schemes of this kind.

19. South Lancashire was very heavily populated. They felt that there was much to be said for planned migration to new towns elsewhere, but they accepted the fact that this was not a practical solution of the pressing needs of Liverpool. They had opposed the county council's original proposal for a new town at Parbold because it would adversely affect an area of exceptional natural beauty and recreational value. Of the present proposal, however, their view was that "provided development is kept well down the hillside (from Ashurst's Beacon) and an effective green belt is established round this, it would be difficult to find a better site which would be attractive and convenient enough for Liverpool as the exporting authority, avoid even better agricultural land, and still leave a substantial belt of open country to the west of Wigan".

20. The branch said that while their fears regarding the Beacon area had been allayed to some extent by comments in the official explanatory memorandum, they wished to stress the great importance they attached to this ridge of high land. They also felt it essential that the green belt scheme submitted a few months ago should be completed by including the attractive rural areas between Wigan and St. Helens and between Wigan and Skelmersdale, particularly the Douglas valley and the hills on either side. Finally they considered that the eventual target of 80,000 was too high for the site and they expressed the hope that this would be cut to something nearer 45,000 so as to permit better housing and open space standards and also reduce the risk that development would creep too far up the hillside towards the Beacon.

TOWN AND COUNTRY PLANNING ASSOCIATION

21. It was explained that the association favour a policy of planned decentralisation in national units. In their view it was wrong both socially and economically to build high blocks of flats, and it was equally wrong in many cases to allow further peripheral growth round existing cities and towns. They regretted that some cities were developing in both these directions.

22. There was appalling overcrowding in some areas, including the north west, and the association considered that this problem called for a bold programme of new towns and expansion of suitable existing towns. There was a need for four new towns in the north west in addition to expansion schemes. They were content to accept the judgment of the Ministry and the county council in regard to the Skelmersdale proposal and they would not think it desirable to modify the plan specifically to meet agricultural considerations.

IV. Objections

NATIONAL FARMERS' UNION LANCASHIRE COUNTY BRANCH

23. The union took a serious view of the continuing loss of good agricultural land for housing. The present case involved a very fertile area and a stable and efficient farming community. The permanent loss of food production would be considerable: but there was also a serious human factor, for a number of farmers would lose their livelihood with their land and would have little or no prospect of finding other farms to go to.

24. The union recognized the need to re-house large numbers of people now living in north Merseyside, but they felt that the problem was not being tackled in the right way. They urged—

- (a) that more intensive use should be made of land on Merseyside by building higher;
- (b) that a great deal could be done by filling out some of the existing townships to the east of Wigan without touching good farm land; and
- (c) that much land at present lying derelict under slag heaps and such like could be used for housing if only the reclamation work were pressed forward as a matter of urgency and importance.

25. It was suggested that the proposed new town would come under the influence of Wigan, since the land between them is already built up to a large extent and used as a dormitory area, and it was feared the two would coalesce. Also the fear was expressed that industry would not, in fact, come to Skelmersdale: reliance would have to be placed on persuasion and if it did not work the town would be a failure.

26. While emphasising that theirs was a root and branch objection, the union went on to mention the following points to be considered and safeguards to be sought if it were finally decided to go ahead with a new town—

- (i) The target of 80,000 was too high. The earlier proposal of the county council was for 50,000 and the union thought it should not be more than 40,000. One witness wanted to limit development to nearer 10,000 by just rounding off the existing town, thus absorbing only some 500 acres of farm land.
- (ii) Compensation to displaced farmers should be adequate. It was mentioned that some improvement in the existing rate of compensation for disturbance was hoped for but local farmers feared it would not come in time for them.
- (iii) Those affected should be fully informed of progress at all stages and given as long notice as possible of dispossession.
- (iv) Adequate provision should be made for dealing with surface drainage.
- (v) In order to reduce the risk of damage from trespass, houses should be kept well back from the boundaries of the site. One witness made a special point of the prevalence of vandalism on the outskirts of urban areas and emphasised the serious effect this could have on farming operations.

WIGAN RURAL DISTRICT COUNCIL

DALTON PARISH COUNCIL

27. These local authorities explained that they were not objecting to the proposal in its entirety. They did not want the scheme but they recognized the extreme difficulties of the housing situation on Merseyside and the need for a bold approach. What they asked for was a modification of the eastern boundary of the site so as to preserve—

- (a) the amenities of Ashurst's Beacon and the nearby slopes; and
- (b) a wider belt of open country between the site and Wigan.

They concentrated on the amenities of the Beacon because the second point was to be the main ground of the objection by Wigan County Borough Council.

28. The authorities were supported by several witnesses in their contention that if the northern boundary of the site remained unaltered the result would be to reduce, if not ruin, the amenities of an area that was highly valued not only by local residents but also by large numbers of visitors from a distance. In addition to the land sloping up to the Beacon there was the attractive road known as Elmer's Green Lane with some very pleasant old houses and buildings and a small area of open common land. If all this remained inside the boundary they feared that sooner or later it would be swallowed up by new housing development.

29. For these reasons they pressed strongly for the exclusion of all land lying above the 300 feet contour or thereabouts—an area of about 700 acres. If it was essential to compensate for this reduction they suggested the addition of some land to the south west and south east of the proposed site. This would amount to some 870 acres in all. They agreed that agriculturally this land was very good indeed and better than the land they wanted to exclude, and admitted that the owners and occupiers of the additional land were unaware of their suggestion. They felt, however, that the interests of a few individuals should give way if this was necessary to preserve the amenities of the Beacon and to leave a wider belt between the new town and Wigan with its adjacent built up areas. An added advantage of the southern extension would be that the Liverpool-Wigan railway would run through that part of the site instead of forming its southern boundary.

WIGAN COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

30. The general ground of the council's objection was that the proposed new town would come so close to Wigan that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to prevent the two towns from merging to form one solid block. The gap of $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles between the two boundaries was wholly insufficient, especially as it included substantial built up areas in Orrell and Up Holland. Along the main road building was already continuous.

31. The council were not objecting to the whole project but felt that the site and the ultimate target of 80,000 population were too large. In order to leave a bigger gap between Skelmersdale and Wigan and also to meet the amenity objection of the rural district council and other bodies, which they fully supported, the borough council suggested that the eastern boundary should follow roughly the 275 feet contour line running on average about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile to the west of the line originally proposed. If necessary this loss to the site (amounting to well over 1,000 acres) should be made up by additions elsewhere.

32. The council felt that the ultimate target of 80,000 was too high in view of the restrictions on the site—agricultural to the south and west, amenity to the north and urban development on the east. There would be no room for further expansion in later years. It would be much better to set a lower and more practicable target, as the county council had done in their earlier scheme for Skelmersdale.

33. Wigan's own interests would be directly threatened only by the possible effect on industry. The council had been reasonably successful in attracting new industry, with a resulting decrease in unemployment. They had not found it easy, and it might be no easier to get industry to settle in Skelmersdale. Persuasion might not be effective, and yet it was most important that industry should not lag behind housing in the new town.

COUNTRY LANDOWNERS' ASSOCIATION

34. The association, like the N.F.U., were wholly opposed to the scheme. Nineteen of their numbers, all owner-occupiers, were affected; and as to the quality of the land their witness put in figures indicating that the output per acre was above the average for similar farms in south west Lancashire.

35. While generally supporting the arguments of the N.F.U., and also those advanced by Wigan County Borough Council, the association laid special stress on the need to reclaim and use land now lying derelict. In their view it was quite wrong to take good agricultural land when there was so much derelict land available—some 12,000 acres in the county as a whole. They strongly advocated town development schemes covering land already partly developed together with reclaimed land. This line of approach would not only help meet the overspill problem but would also get rid of many eyesores and so do a real favour to existing urban areas. Town development schemes had not been given a proper trial, and there was no reason why they should not be placed much farther afield—in east Lancashire or even Yorkshire.

36. The association recognized that it would take time to bring derelict land back into use but they felt the same could be said about developing a new town at Skelmersdale, especially as the site included a number of disused mines where special precautions would be needed and an area from which glass sand would have to be taken and the land allowed to settle.

37. The association claimed that it was not their practice to object to new town and other large development schemes as a matter of course. They objected only when they felt there were solid reasons for so doing, as they did in this case.

LANCASHIRE RIVER BOARD

38. The board had lodged a formal objection not because they opposed the project but in order to emphasise the vital importance of efficient surface drainage.

39. It was estimated that with the development of the suggested new town the River Tawd would have to carry at peak periods up to three times its present capacity, with a consequent increase in the flow of the River Douglas into which the Tawd runs some 2-3 miles beyond the northern boundary of the proposed area. In the Croston Internal Drainage District (through which the Douglas runs after being joined by the Tawd) there are already flooding problems due to building development on the higher land, and the board are considering

an improvement scheme estimated to cost nearly £80,000. Further substantial and costly improvement works to both rivers would be essential if the new town were to proceed. Although no plan had been prepared it was thought that the works would cost at least £50,000 and the Board felt that this should not fall on ratepayers in other parts of their area.

40. Other objectors raised much the same points about surface drainage. There was no suggestion that the necessary improvement works would present any technical difficulties: indeed the board's Chief Engineer had specifically said they would not.

MRS. GREEN

41. A life-long resident, a school teacher and now also a member of the urban district council, Mrs. Green objected (for her husband as well as herself) on a variety of grounds. Her recent address to the electors of Skelmersdale had mentioned her objection to the new town, but she agreed there was no telling whether on balance this gained votes for her or lost them.

42. She felt the scheme might prove to be a blunder. That part of Lancashire was already much too crowded and had developed in a haphazard fashion dictated by the needs of commercial interests. She thought the overspill problem should be solved by a number of smaller towns, but if a large new town was necessary then let it be farther afield where there was "room to breathe". What would happen when Skelmersdale had its own overspill problem, as Kirkby now had after only a very few years? The density suggested for the new town was too high and the whole thing was on much too large a scale for Skelmersdale. The area was more valuable as a lung for the people of south Lancashire than as a new town of 80,000 people. She thought there had been insufficient foresight and imagination in dealing with this overspill problem.

MR. ROY LYON

43. Mr. Lyon's objection also was based on the view that the southern part of the country was already overcrowded, and in addition he thought the amenity value of the Beacon area would be seriously affected. He made it clear, however, that he fully appreciated the enormous problem presented by parts of north Merseyside: that he welcomed the intention to limit the further sprawl of Liverpool and to preserve a green belt behind; and that he also welcomed the proposed use of the New Towns Act. He favoured a compact town of some 30-40,000 at Skelmersdale with a reasonable green belt around it; and other new towns elsewhere, not necessarily in south Lancashire.

WRITTEN OBJECTIONS AND REPRESENTATIONS

44. *Kirkby Urban District Council* had no objection to the suggested new town but would oppose any transfer of population from Kirkby to Skelmersdale.

45. *Mr. O. C. Lace* objected on agricultural, amenity and planning grounds already covered by other objectors. He suggested as an alternative that Burtonwood airfield should be used for the civil air traffic of Liverpool and Manchester jointly and that the two existing airports should be used for housing.

46. *Wigan and District Brewers' Association* represented that the interests of the owners of existing licensed properties in the area should be duly considered by the Development Corporation, and added that they would welcome opportunities of consultation with that authority if the new town proposal were to go ahead.

47. *Mr. J. T. Price, M.P.* objected on amenity grounds to the inclusion of any part of Wigan rural district, thus supporting the case put forward at the Inquiry by Wigan Rural District Council and Dalton Parish Council.

48. *Mr. C. H. A. Appleton* objected mainly on agricultural and amenity grounds. He suggested that Skelmersdale should be developed on a small scale and that this should be supplemented by further development and re-development of urban areas to the east of Wigan.

49. *Brocks Fireworks Ltd.* drew attention to the position of their subsidiary factory established after the war on derelict land in the middle of the area. They explained the difficulty of finding sites suitable for their very special requirements, and said that if they were now required to move they would incur heavy loss and the process would take four or five years.

V. Discussion

50. None of the objectors, not even those who opposed the scheme in its entirety, questioned for one moment the need to rehouse the many families now living in overcrowded slum areas in north Merseyside. The magnitude and urgency of this problem were generally accepted, and in the remarks of more than one objector one could detect the hope that they would not be thought unsympathetic to the plight of those still having to put up with very poor living conditions.

51. The main objections rested for the most part on one or more of three grounds—agriculture, amenity and general planning. These are discussed in turn below.

AGRICULTURE

52. It had been conceded at the outset that the agricultural land in the designated area was of good quality, some parts of it better than others, but none poor or even below the general average for that part of the country. It was only to be expected, and indeed quite right and proper, that the National Farmers' Union and the Country Landowners' Association should seek to save this land from development. Understandably enough, they did not suggest specific alternative areas of farm land. They used the familiar general arguments which command a great deal of sympathy—that land given up to housing is lost to agriculture for good, that food production is very important, that too much agricultural land has been lost already, and that good land should be spared if less good land can be used. They also wanted to see more high blocks of flats in existing cities and towns so as to increase housing density and reduce pressure on farm land.

53. The point that impressed me most, however, was their pressure for the reclamation and use of the derelict land that is to be found so frequently in this part of the country. I was later shown a number of sites that have been reclaimed by the county council or the Wigan County Borough Council and are now, or shortly will be, put to some useful purpose, mainly playing fields and public open spaces. The results are most striking and highly encouraging. Many other sites remain to be tackled—old slag heaps, areas of mining subsidence, and such like—and I gathered that the county council intend to push ahead with this excellent work and also the county borough within their more limited sphere. The authorities concerned deserve every possible support and encouragement.

54. Unfortunately these reclaimed areas are seldom stable enough to be used for housing except after a considerable time to allow for settlement. Moreover they are mostly comparatively small in size, so that they do not provide a practicable alternative to the Skelmersdale proposal. But the more there are of them the more will they ease the pressure on good land in the future and the more will they contribute to the amenities of urban areas that are so short of playing fields and parks.

55. Other suggestions for saving good agricultural land, namely, that other existing towns and townships should be filled in and expanded, are again not alternatives but supplements to the new town approach. The housing problem is so vast and so urgent that it must be tackled in various ways at the same time if a real impression is to be made on it. Town development schemes, smaller in-filling schemes, and more efficient re-development of old built up areas—all of these ought to be pressed forward. But it seems that they are not going to be enough without new towns as well.

56. Clearly, agricultural factors were taken into account in drawing the boundaries of the proposed area. Some of the best land lies in the south east of the area running down to the railway and one would have liked to see this saved if at all possible. On the other hand this section of the site is in mind for industrial use and for that purpose it would be important to have railway facilities right on the doorstep.

57. One thing that must be done if the new town is proceeded with is to keep farmers informed of the progress of the project and to warn them individually well in advance of the time when their land will be needed so that farming plans can be adjusted accordingly. The town will take a long while to complete and some of the farm land can probably remain in agricultural use for several years. No doubt the development corporation will be alive to the advantage of taking farmers—and other interested parties—into their confidence at frequent intervals.

58. The fear of vandalism on farm land near the borders of the built up area is very real, and unfortunately it is encouraged by what has actually happened elsewhere. This is most regrettable but it should not influence the decision on the new town proposal. Protection from wanton damage must be sought in other ways.

AMENITY

59. The objection on amenity grounds was led by the Wigan Rural District Council and the Dalton Parish Council and received support from other quarters. It concerned Ashurst's Beacon and the rising ground to the south of it, including Elmer's Green Lane and a small area of common land known as Elmer's Green. The Beacon itself is outside the area, lying just beyond the road forming the northern boundary.

60. The amenity value of the Beacon and the immediately surrounding land is obvious. In other parts of the country, even near some large urban areas, the Beacon would be so outshone as to attract little or no attention. Here in south Lancashire it stands out as a priceless natural asset. No wonder there is so much anxiety lest the new town should seriously damage existing amenities. It would indeed have been most disappointing if this matter had not been raised in a big way.

61. The objectors made it clear that they would be reassured only if the north eastern boundary were redrawn so as to exclude a large slice of the Beacon's southerly slopes. They were not satisfied by the suggestion in the explanatory memorandum that the development corporation could be expected to pay due regard to amenity in the planning of a new town and that land on the northern fringe of the area would no doubt be used for open space so that the view to and from the Beacon on that side would be affected as little as possible.

62. I well understand the objectors' attitude on this but do not share it, preferring the line taken by the Council for the Preservation of Rural England in the light of their wide experience of issues of this kind. In these days public bodies are usually active and effective in the preservation of amenities; and that is what one would expect of a development corporation composed of highly responsible persons who would be very much in the public eye and anxious for their venture to be a success in every way. Indeed, there is something to be said for extending the boundary so as to bring the Beacon itself within the area and under the protecting wing of the corporation. Such a change, however, would be inadvisable now.

63. If the new town proposal goes ahead it will be important for the corporation to take the local interests into their confidence and explain before decisions are finally taken how it is proposed to safeguard the amenity of the Beacon and the adjoining slopes.

GENERAL PLANNING

64. Under this heading there is the objection that south Lancashire is already much too overcrowded to be saddled with another large town. This view is widely held but it is not shared by the county council who have considerable responsibility and experience in the field of planning. Nor is it supported by the Council for the Preservation of Rural England who are closely interested and at the same time are able to look at the problem from a wider standpoint than the purely local one. Certainly it would be better if there were much more breathing space in this part of the county, but taking the position as it is one cannot see a better site for a new town if it is needed within easy reach of north Merseyside. If more new towns have to be provided to cope with overspill from that area there may be no alternative to siting them much farther afield.

65. There is also the point made strongly by Wigan County Borough Council, and touched on by others, that there would be too narrow a gap between the new town and Wigan with its adjoining built up areas. From this point of view it would be an advantage to move the site bodily a mile or so to the west. This, however, would affect more really first class farm land, and agriculture is already being asked to give up enough with the site in its present position. Behind the ribbon development on either side of the road between the designated area and the outskirts of Wigan there is some open land that makes a very pleasant break even if it is not as extensive as one would wish. The very fact that it is so restricted should make the authorities concerned all the more determined to preserve it from any further encroachment.

66. Finally there is the question of the population size of the proposed new town. Several objectors thought the target of 80,000 was too high and preferred a figure around the 40-50,000 range—some with much the same area and a lower density and others with an area reduced by cutting out some of the agricultural and amenity land. Some people seemed to be regarding 80,000 as

the immediate aim whereas in fact the proposal is that the corporation should plan to build for 50,000 and the larger figure would be reached considerably later as a result of natural expansion. Population targets must depend very largely on the area of the site. Once the boundaries had been settled the corporation would be going into questions of this kind, including the related matter of housing density, and it can safely be assumed that they would pay attention to recent experience elsewhere, especially in other new towns.

VI. Conclusions and Recommendations

67. For at least ten years there have been discussions and suggestions for developing Skelmersdale to a greater or lesser extent in order to house some of the overspill from north Merseyside. Progress has been very slow and for all the effort that has been expended there is little or no result to show on the ground. That the existing town ought to be extended seems to be agreed by most of the interested parties and the idea of proceeding under the New Towns Act appears to have aroused little opposition. The main argument is about how big the town should be. The higher the target the stronger the objections become.
68. The present new town proposal, for the reception of 50,000 followed by natural growth to an eventual total of 80,000 in an area of 4,000 acres, is the largest yet suggested. On the other hand the problem of overspill has itself grown in recent years and it is causing increasing anxiety. I think this justifies the view that if a new town is to be based on Skelmersdale it ought to be as large as circumstances permit so as to make a really substantial impression on the underlying problem. At the same time there ought to be no easing of the pressure for town development schemes wherever these seem appropriate.
69. In other circumstances one would have liked to save some of the best agricultural land, such as that running down to the railway on the south of the suggested site, and also to see a larger gap between the new town and Wigan, but I fear the case for reducing the area must give way to the overriding importance and urgency of the housing problem. However, if landowners and farmers are to make this sacrifice they should be given every possible consideration in the programming of the operation. Further, the reclamation of derelict areas should be pressed on with in the hope that this will reduce future demands on other agricultural land for development.
70. Some of the points raised at the Inquiry were based on fears lest something or other should not go as intended—if there were not enough industry to keep local workers employed, if the amenities of Ashurst's Beacon and Ridge were not sufficiently preserved, and if inadequate provision were made to deal with surface drainage, etc. It was right that these fears should have been expressed but I think one must assume that the authorities concerned will do what is expected of them. The point about industry is especially important as it affects the success of the entire scheme, and it is one that will deserve the closest attention of the Board of Trade.
71. Having considered very carefully the objections put before me at the Inquiry and all other relevant factors, I have come to the conclusion that the draft Designation Order should be confirmed without amendment and I *recommend* accordingly.

I am, Sir

Your obedient Servant,

RICHARD MANKTELOW.